

## **i'm ready to break, you're ready to bend by GhostGrantaire**

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**Summary:**

Jonathan froze as soon as he saw him like he'd seen a ghost. He clearly hadn't expected company, and was dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt underneath an old flannel. They stared at each other for a long moment before Jonathan's eyes dropped to Steve's cheek, which was still stinging slightly. Steve shuddered under the attention, but luckily it was cold enough that it probably wasn't obvious.

Finally Steve cleared his throat. "You gonna let me in, or watch me freeze to death?"

## **i'm ready to break, you're ready to bend**

### **Author's Note:**

For Ely! Hopefully this will help suffice your Steve deficiency.

Title comes from the song "Believer" by Paper Lions, even though I actually switched the words around a bit to fit better.

Steve walked down the road quickly. His eyes were burning, but he wasn't sure how much of that was from the cold. It was freezing, and he tucked his hands under his armpits before the fell off. Winter in Indiana was always shitty, but in the evening it was even worse.

"Why the hell couldn't you have grabbed your jacket, Harrington?" he muttered angrily at himself under his breath.

His teeth were chattering, which unfortunately only worsened the soreness in his jaw. His cheek stung bitterly, and he tried not to think about it, since it only brought hot tears to his eyes. He dragged a hand over his face and continued stomping through the cold, empty streets until he spotted his destination.

The phone booth was still freezing, only a couple of degrees warmer than the outside, but he pushed through. He grabbed some quarters out of his back pocket-- he was so thankful he actually got in the habit of keeping change on him in case of emergencies-- and inserted them into the slot. He grabbed the phone off the hook and pressed it to his ear, grateful for his hair which kept the cold plastic of the phone away from his skin.

He dialed the number slowly, not because he had to think about it but because his hands were so cold it felt like he was wearing six pairs of layered gloves. As he waited, Steve looked at his reflection in the glass. His cheek was still bright red, which didn't surprise him, and there the skin on his jaw looked a bit darker that he was used to. He pressed his fingers to it softly and winced as pain shot through his skull. That was definitely going to bruise.

He stared at himself for a bit longer, feeling his throat tighten up as his mind raced over the events of that evening. He took a shaky breath which felt like he was breathing through cotton balls.

“Hi, Wheeler residence,” Mike’s young bored voice called out over the line, and Steve cleared his throat, standing up a bit straighter.

“Hey kid, is your sister there?” Steve asked, trying to keep his voice normal.

Mike sighed before yelling out to Nancy on the other end of the call. Steve waited patiently until a familiar voice rang out.

“Steve?” His girlfriend asked, and he couldn’t help but relax slightly at her voice.

“Hey Nance,” he responded, trying to keep it as casual as possible “What’re you doing right now?”

“We’re having game night with the Henderson’s. I told you that, didn’t I?” She asked slowly.

Steve closed his eyes, instantly upset with himself for forgetting. He hated making Nancy feel like he didn’t listen to her. “Yeah, no, sorry, I just forgot.” He paused, wondering if he should just give up, but he pressed on desperately. “So that’s gonna go late tonight?”

“You want to come over, don’t you?” She asked, though it wasn’t much of a question. She sounded unimpressed, but also a bit amused, so he got the feeling she wasn’t actually upset. Steve stayed quiet. “Steve, there’s no way I can get out of this. They’re totally going to notice if I sneak upstairs. I’m sorry, alright?”

Nancy *did* sound sorry, and there was no way he could hold it against her, but some irrational part of him couldn’t help but feel incredibly unwanted at that moment. *She has better things to do that give a shit about you*, a voice sneered at him from the back of his mind.

He pressed his forehead against the cold glass of the phone booth, squeezing his eyes shut in frustration as he pushed the angry thoughts aside. His eyes felt hot as the tears that had been threatening to spill over bubbled up to the surface. *She’s my girlfriend*,

Steve reminded himself. *That's it. She doesn't owe me anything. Stop being dramatic.*

He cleared his throat and blinked rapidly before responding, but his words still sounded a bit strangled. "Right. Sorry, I shouldn't have called."

Nancy didn't say anything for a second, and Steve wondered momentarily if she'd hung up. "Hey are you okay? You sound a bit odd."

"I'm great, Nance," he responded a bit too quickly. His voice broke slightly in the middle of the sentence, and he winced, knowing there was no way she didn't pick up on that.

"Steve, if something's wrong--" she started, her voice soft but serious, and *fuck* he needed to stop this before he started crying in a phone booth.

"Nancy, nothing's wrong," he said with a chuckle that somehow managed to sound normal. "I just miss you, is all."

There was a silence before Nancy spoke up again. "Alright. Well, I'll see you Monday, right? At school?"

"Of course," he responded easily, already a bit distracted as he looked around outside to see where he'd head next.

"I miss you too, Steve," she suddenly said, and that brought Steve directly back to the conversation. He smiled, easily able to picture the blush she was wearing from her voice.

"Bye Nance," he answered back, finding it a bit easier to breathe after that.

Steve heard the dial tone take over the call and he set the phone back on the hook. He walked out of the phone booth and glanced around at the streets, not sure what his Plan B was quite yet. It had started snowing again in the time he was on the phone, a soft sprinkle of snowflakes drifting down. He pulled the sleeves of his sweater down over his hands and jammed them into his pockets before they got too cold.

There was a Waffle House that was only about a ten-minute walk away, but he doubted they would let him sit in there without ordering anything and he definitely hadn't grabbed his wallet either.

"Nice going, man," he muttered to himself. He was thankful it was late enough that everyone was at home, because he wasn't sure how sane he looked at the moment.

He probably could've walked to the Wheeler's anyway- not many families just turn someone away when it's freezing cold and they've got a swollen cheek. But he could just picture the shocked and sympathetic faces in his mind, and that was enough to set him off the idea. Even Nancy would pity him, and he really didn't want that. He loved her to death, and would probably die for her in a heartbeat (he'd already gotten too close to testing that theory), but she wouldn't understand.

Without realizing, he'd started walking down the road nearing the forest. He let his feet lead him to his destination without any conscious thought. Deep down, he knew where he was going, but he pushed it out of his head for about ten minutes before he stared down the driveway to the old house on the edge of the woods.

*What the hell are you doing?* A voice that sounded suspiciously like Carol's shouted at him from the back of his mind, but he pushed it away and made his way to the front door. There was music playing from inside, something loud that sounded vaguely familiar but nothing he could place a finger on. He knocked twice before he could change his mind. As he waited for the door to open, he focused all his energy on not freezing to death.

The music cut off and then the door swung open, and suddenly Steve was staring into the face of Jonathan Byers.

Jonathan froze as soon as he saw him like he'd seen a ghost. He clearly hadn't expected company, and was dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt underneath an old flannel. They stared at each other for a long moment before Jonathan's eyes dropped to Steve's cheek, which was still stinging slightly. Steve shuddered under the attention, but luckily it was cold enough that it probably wasn't obvious.

Finally Steve cleared his throat. "You gonna let me in, or watch me freeze to death?"

Wordlessly, Jonathan opened the door wider and stepped aside so Steve could slip past him. It was warm in the house, and Steve couldn't help the shiver of relief that went through him as the cold slowly began to slip off of him.

Jonathan hadn't stopped staring at him, and that was way too much for Steve to handle at that moment, so he spoke up. "Is your family here?"

"No," Jonathan replied. His voice was hoarse, like he hadn't spoken much recently. "My mom's on a date. Will is at the Sinclair's."

"Are you busy?" Steve asked. Part of him hoped that Jonathan would say yes, that he was swamped with homework or about to fall asleep. Then Steve could at least say he *tried*, but Jonathan just shook his head.

Steve nodded in acknowledgement. Jonathan looked at his cheek again, and the intensity in his eyes made Steve uncomfortable, but he didn't know what to say.

"You can sit down if you want," Jonathan offered after a moment, sounding hesitant.

Grateful for an excuse to do something other than stand there, Steve sat on the couch and peeled off his jacket, which was cold and wet from the snow. Jonathan sat at the edge of the armchair across from him, looking uncomfortable and out of place even in his own home. Steve got the feeling it was his fault.

Steve had held maybe two conversations with Jonathan since the whole...*thing*, and one of those was the incredibly awkward attempt at a normal apology. Jonathan had kept telling him he didn't have to, saying that they were "even", but Steve didn't believe that for a second. They'd left things better than they were, but there was no way that anyone would call them friends. In fact, if it weren't for Nancy, they probably would've drifted apart completely.

So what the *hell* was he doing here?

“Do you want to, I don’t know, talk about it?” Jonathan asked with a shrug, breaking the careful silence. He tripped over his words, clearly not sure of the protocol here.

“Nope,” Steve responded without hesitation. There was no way he was going to talk about his *feelings* with Jonathan freaking Byers.

He leaned back in his seat and glanced around the house. He realized with a start that this was the first time he’d been back in the Byers’ home since November. It was cleaner than he remembered, and the hole in the wall had been fixed, although it was still bare and stood out against the rest of the wall. He stared at the ceiling, remembering vividly the image of a monster falling out of it. It gave him the creeps just thinking about it, and he wondered how Jonathan could spend all his time here. Since November, Steve hadn’t gotten close to his swimming pool, and he hadn’t even seen what had happened there. Jonathan was a hell of a lot braver than him, that was for sure.

“It wasn’t Tommy, was it?” Jonathan suddenly asked, and Steve redirected his attention. He wasn’t looking at Steve. His head was ducked down, and he was wringing his hands anxiously. Steve frowned, and Jonathan glanced up to meet his eyes, shrugging. “I just... figure you’d look a lot worse if you got in a fight with Tommy H.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Maybe I won,” he shot back, though he wasn’t sure why he even bothered.

Jonathan gave a small snort, as if the very idea of Steve winning in a fight was ridiculous. Steve got the feeling he should have been offended, but he really couldn’t find the energy, so he turned back to staring at the ceiling.

“Was it your dad?” Jonathan asked, his voice quieter.

Steve froze at the question. *No*, he wanted to yell in response, but he suddenly couldn’t remember how to form the word.

"That's a nice picture!" He said instead, nodding at a framed photograph on the counter. It was a nice picture-- Joyce Byers had her arms wrapped tightly around Will's stomach, and her face was tucked in his neck, no doubt peppering her youngest child with kisses as he laughed. "Looks like it should be on a Christmas card."

Jonathan didn't say anything for a moment and just looked at the picture. His eyes were softer as he looked at it. "I don't think we're really a Christmas card kind of family."

Steve snorted, and the sound brought Jonathan's eyes back to him. "You should be glad for that," Steve commented. "We have to do one every year, and it's shit. This year was particularly terrible. My mom sat in this ugly and uncomfortable chair, and me and my dad stood behind her in suits, and we all try to smile like we don't all wish we were anywhere but there. I looked like some kind of uptight senator with nice hair."

Jonathan looked down, but Steve caught the beginning of a smile on his lips. It occurred to him that he'd never made Jonathan smile before, and the realization made him feel strangely proud at that moment.

"Why do you do it, if everyone hates it?" He asked after a moment. "Because we..." Steve faded off, frowning. He didn't really have an answer to that. It was just the way things were. "We just do. If we didn't, it'd be like the end of the world. Hell, it could be like a Mad Max apocalyptic wasteland, and my mom would *still* prioritize those goddamn cards. Hell if I know why."

As he spoke, Steve began to think about how vastly different his life was from Jonathan's. It was almost as if him, a Harrington, sitting on the Byers' couch was plain abnormal, like a housecat walking through the middle of Antarctica. He looked at Jonathan, and got the strange feeling that he was thinking the exact same thing.

They drifted back into silence, which Steve didn't mind. He rubbed at his jaw, which was actually growing more painful with time. He opened and closed his mouth several times, feeling as the joint groaned with the movement and made a small popping sound.



He frowned. If this didn't fix itself soon, making out with Nancy was going to be a bitch.

Jonathan suddenly stood up and walked briskly into the kitchen.

Steve stared after him, wondering how he could have pissed him off in such short a time. *Whatever*, Steve thought, *It's not like you wanted to talk to him about it*. That wasn't why he was here. He came here to... to what? Get away from the cold?

Sitting here on the Byers' couch completely alone with a bruised jaw... he was starting to miss the snow.

All of a sudden Jonathan reentered the room, now holding a small bowl with a spoon stuck inside. He handed it to Steve without explanation, and he looked down to see--

"Ice cream?" Steve asked, feeling bewildered.

Jonathan kept frowning, but Steve realized now it was out of uncertainty rather than anger. "For your jaw," he explained gruffly. "Soft cold foods help."

Steve blinked. He hadn't meant to be obvious before, but Jonathan must've noticed. It was... thoughtful. "You have ice cream in January?" He heard himself say, and he'd never wanted to punch himself more.

Jonathan frowned, immediately curling in on himself, and Steve wanted to shout at him to stop it. "Yeah, well, Will wanted some... you don't have to eat it if you don't want to."

He reached out to take it back, and Steve immediately took a huge spoonful of the vanilla ice cream and popped it into his mouth possessively. "Didn't say I didn't want it," he said around the food.

Jonathan blinked at him like he had three heads before turning and sitting back down. Steve swallowed the ice cream, the sweetness of it waking him up a bit. He watched as the younger boy picked at the moth holes in his shirt.

"You ready for school on Monday?" Steve asked. He was never good at staying quiet.

Jonathan looked up. "Not really," he responded honestly. There was an awkward pause. "You?"

"Better to be stuck at school than stuck at home," Steve responded without thinking. The answer was a bit more honest than he'd been going for. Jonathan seemed to be taken by surprise as well. "I mean, I've got friends at school, you know."

Steve looked down at his ice cream before he could see the other boy's reaction. They both knew perfectly well that the only real friend Steve had left was Nancy, and he'd still seen plenty of her over the holidays.

"Are you going to join any clubs or anything? Gotta build up that resume, right?" Steve tried to joke.

Jonathan looked at him with distaste, though he figured it was more because of the stupid question. "Yeah," he drawled sarcastically. "I'm going to join a club. That's what I'm gonna do."

Steve snorted at the sarcasm in amusement. He hadn't been exposed to much of Jonathan's sense of humor, but it took him by surprise every time, and he found it hilarious. "Yeah, I get that. I was thinking about going out for baseball again, but I'm not so sure anymore."

*Not since I used a baseball bat to knock out an eight foot monster from a parallel universe,* he didn't say, but Jonathan nodded like he understood.

"I hate baseball," Jonathan said suddenly with obvious distaste. After a second he looked up guiltily. "Sorry, I mean, it's not that bad..."

Steve laughed. "It's okay. I mean, I love baseball, sure, but I can handle one person not liking it."

Jonathan relaxed. "Sorry," he said again anyways. He looked at Steve, a weirdly sad look in his eyes. "It was always my dad's sport."

Well then. That changed the mood.

Steve looked down at the bowl of ice cream again. The silence that came over them was the most uncomfortable one yet. He didn't know what to say. (That wasn't true. He knew *exactly* what to say. He just didn't know how to say it.)

He spared a subtle glance towards Jonathan. He was lost in thought, and judging by the look on his face, they weren't good thoughts. The image sent a jolt of guilt and discomfort through Steve. He wanted to fix this.

"You were right, before," Steve found himself saying. He looked back down at the ice cream like a life line. "It was my dad."

He waited for a gasp, a whine of pity, anything, but he was met with silence. He looked at Jonathan, who was watching him carefully. He didn't look surprised, and for some reason that upset Steve.

"But you know, I deserved it. I was egging him on and totally asking for it. I mean, come on, you know better than anyone that sometimes I need to get punched," Steve continued, hoping the joke would lighten the mood, but it served the opposite effect.

Jonathan flinched, his frown deepening. *Bad joke, Harrington*, he thought to himself, regretting his words. He honestly didn't even know why he cared what Jonathan Byers thought of his dad, but for some reason he needed to set things straight.

"He's not a bad guy," Steve tried again.

"Sure," Jonathan replied monotonously. Steve couldn't detect any hidden implications in that response. Hell, he couldn't detect *anything* from that response. So naturally he plowed on.

"Well maybe he's an asshole sometimes, but like, he's my dad. And he's just a bit strict and stuff sometimes but he still loves me. It's not like he hits me all the time, you know, he's a dick, sure, but he's not abusive or whatever, he's not like--"

Steve stopped short, the words freezing on his tongue.

"He's not like my dad," Jonathan finished for him. He didn't look angry, like Steve thought he'd be.

It wasn't like it was a secret. The first time Steve had ever laid eyes on Jonathan in elementary school, he remembered seeing the bruise around his wrist, like someone had grabbed him a bit too roughly. The bruises hadn't stopped there. Everyone in town knew about Lonnie Byers, even if there were mixed reactions about him. Some people thought he was an abusive asshole, some of them thought he did the best he could with his sons, and some of them thought he was a goddamned hero just for being able to get out of Hawkins. Steve's parents had nothing but distaste for Lonnie Byers, but it had more to do with his image and presentation of himself than his parenting style.

Steve didn't know what to say, so he just shrugged. He couldn't meet Jonathan's eyes, so he looked back at the melting ice cream instead, pushing it around with his spoon. He wondered if he should apologize, but he kept quiet, not wanting to step on any more toes. He'd already gotten kicked out of one house that night. He didn't want to make it two.

Steve shivered at the thought of going back out in the snow. Jonathan must've noticed, because he reached over to grab a coat on the chair and tossed it to Steve without question. Steve caught it, his quick reflexes coming in handy, and stared at the denim jacket. Jonathan shrugged, looking unconcerned with the fact that he just offered to let Steve wear his clothes.

*Well*, Steve thought as he set the ice cream down and shrugged on the jacket, *if it doesn't bother him, it can't hurt*. Steve was lankier than Jonathan, but he remembered the sleeves being too long on the younger boy, so it fit without too much trouble. It was warm, and Steve couldn't help but pull it tight around him, waiting for the warmth to seep into his bones.

"What'd you do, then?" Jonathan asked, leaning forward on his elbows. He nodded towards Steve's cheek. He sounded curious, but not judgmental, and Steve appreciated it.

He smirked, though it felt a bit bitter. "I told him that he should start bringing Julia to family dinners. She's the woman he's been screwing for like five years now."

Jonathan blinked, clearly surprised at the information. "He didn't know you knew about her?"

Despite himself, Steve chuckled at that. "Nah, he knows. I mean, everyone knows, just nobody ever talks about it. Including me, usually."

"Oh."

Steve flopped down on the couch, continuing with the story. "Yeah, I said that if she came over, then maybe my dad would actually start showing up for dinner, since he can't seem to stay away from her. And that if he was serious about me being out of control and how I need to be kept in line more, than having two moms would probably get the job done. He didn't seem to like that very much."

Jonathan let out a small chuckle, and Steve grinned at him, ignoring the pain in his jaw. He was surprised at how much he liked making Jonathan laugh. It felt like an accomplishment, being able to put a smile on Jonathan Byers' face.

There was more to the story, but Steve stopped there. He didn't need to talk about the yelling, the shouts about sons respecting fathers and the replies about husbands respecting wives. That part of the story was too depressing, and Steve was nothing if not a good entertainer.

"Hey, what were you listening to before I go here?" Steve asked, the thought suddenly occurring to him.

Jonathan glanced over at the speakers, blushing like he hadn't known Steve had heard. "Bowie," he mumbled in answer.

Steve hummed and nodded. That made sense. He didn't actively listen to Bowie, but he's heard him on the radio from time to time. "Do you want to keep listening?"

Jonathan looked at him suspiciously, like he was trying to figure out if it was a trick or not, and Steve made sure to keep his expression genuine. He got the feeling Jonathan was just starting to let his guard down, and he didn't want to mess that up.

Satisfied with whatever he found, Jonathan crossed to the stereo and

pushed the tape back in, waiting to sit back down until the music began to play. An electric guitar rang out through the small room and Steve waited patiently for the lyrics to start.

It wasn't his kind of music, but as he listened to it, he couldn't help but bob his head in time with the beat and hum along to the strange melody. He could see why Jonathan listened to this stuff. It was meant to be played at top volume, to be screamed at the top of your lungs, and Steve felt like he could resonate with that emotion.

It was a long song, but Steve didn't get bored, taking in every guitar solo and verse with excitement. When it ended and gave way to a slower song, he looked over at Jonathan.

"Could we, uh," Steve floundered. "Could we play that again?"

Jonathan smiled briefly but obediently went to take out the tape and manually rewind it. Thirty seconds later, the song started again. Steve closed his eyes and listened to the melody wash over him again, humming along to the parts he remembered.

When it ended for the second time, Steve didn't have to ask before Jonathan was rewinding the tape again. This time, Steve watched Jonathan, who was mouthing along to the words and moving his hands like he was playing on the drums. Steve didn't know any words besides "teenage wildlife," but every time Bowie sang it, Steve made sure to sing it unison, much to Jonathan's apparent delight.

The song ended for the third time, and this time Jonathan grabbed a tape from the table. "Trust me, you'll like this," Jonathan said confidently as he stuck it in the stereo and waited for it to play.

Steve did like it—it was softer, but still rebellious with a good melody and awesome guitar phrases, and he felt exhilarated just listening to it. He grinned through the whole thing. It made his jaw ache, but he didn't care. It was the best he'd felt all night.

They went through countless tapes, mostly of Bowie, but there were other punk bands interspersed, some Steve like more than others. He really did like listening to the music, but after a while, he began to just watch Jonathan. Jonathan stayed thoughtful through the whole

thing, closing his eyes and listening to each song like it was the best thing he'd ever heard. He wasn't sure why, but something about it made Steve want to take a picture of him.

After they finished another tape, Steve glanced at the clock on the wall, which now read 12:21. It must've been later than he'd thought when he'd stormed out of his house.

"What time is your mom getting back?" he asked the other boy.

Jonathan glanced at the clock and frowned, like he had forgotten time was passing. "She didn't say really. Probably soon."

Steve sat forward and reached for his shoes, which he'd kicked off sometime during the mini concert. "I should probably get home. Before my mom sends out an APB."

He said the last part with a crooked smile, even though it was a stupid joke. It was past midnight—his parents were fast asleep whether he was home or not.

"Are you sure?" Jonathan asked hesitantly. "You could stay here, if... if you wanted."

Steve shook his head. He appreciated the offer, but he didn't think he could sleep in that house without having nightmares. Not that he was going to tell Jonathan that. "Nah, I'll be fine. Besides, I know how to sneak in my own house, and my dad has work early tomorrow. If I'm lucky, I can avoid a lecture about tonight until..." he tilted his head in thought. "Probably Monday."

Jonathan nodded, and they both got to their feet. Steve suddenly remembered the weight of the jacket on his shoulders, and he glanced down at it, unsure.

"You can keep it," Jonathan said, and Steve's eyes flew to his. Jonathan frowned, reddening slightly. "For the walk home, I mean. It's cold out there. I'd feel like a shitty host if I let you freeze out there. You can give it back at school."

Steve nodded and tucked his hands into the pockets, grateful for the warmth. He made his way to the door, and Jonathan followed

behind him. He paused, not sure what to say.

“Hey, thanks man,” Steve said, dropping his hand from where he had reached for the doorknob. Jonathan startled, like Steve had just said something insanely ridiculous. Maybe he had.

“I didn’t do anything,” the boy responded, scratching awkwardly at his jaw.

“You’re a good guy,” Steve said with a shrug. He paused, not sure what to say. “I can see why she likes you.”

Jonathan’s eyes jumped to his, and a blush came over his cheeks. It was subtle, but he was so pale that any coloring stood out starkly. Steve just smirked and clapped him on the shoulder before walking outside. It was still freezing, but at least the snow had stopped. He glanced back to see Jonathan standing in the doorway, watching him closely. They shared one last awkward smile before Steve strolled leisurely down the road, humming a Bowie song to break to eerie silence around him.